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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR CO

SUBJECT: COLOMBIA'S SMALLER PARTIES NOT GAINING TRACTION

REF: A. BOGOTA 1327

1B. BOGOTA 1447

Classified By: Political Counselor Jeffrey DeLaurentis.

Reasons: 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

11. (C) Two popular former Bogota mayors, Enrique Penalosa and Antanas Mockus, are struggling to attract support for their newly-formed political parties in the run-up to the March 12 Congressional elections. As the figureheads of the political parties "Por el Pais que Sonamos" (Sonamos) and "Visionarios," Penalosa and Mockus enjoy wide recognition and support among Bogota residents, but their personal popularity has not translated into support for their parties in polls. Sonamos and Visionarios appear precariously close to not attaining the necessary 2 percent benchmark to be recognized as national parties. Although most Embassy interlocutors believe both parties will attain enough votes to gain recognition, Penalosa and Mockus' 2010 presidential stock could decline if they don't perform well on election day.
End Summary.

Popularity not Translating

12. (C) Although Penalosa and Mockus were successful mayors of Bogota and have high name recognition, their popularity has not converted to support for their parties' candidates. In a January 2006 Gallup poll, Mockus and Penalosa were third and fourth out of 25 of the most popular politicians, with 49 and 48 percent favorability ratings respectively (President Uribe, who has enjoyed popularity ratings of 70 percent, was not included in the survey). Only 36 percent of respondents viewed Mockus unfavorably, with Penalosa at 32 percent. However, a March 5 poll in "El Tiempo," Colombia's leading newspaper, showed Penalosa's Sonamos with just 2.4 percent support among potential voters, and Mockus' Visionarios with a mere 0.8 percent. (Parties must gain 2 percent of the overall vote to be officially recognized nationally. Embassy estimates 8-12 parties will reach this mark. Ref A.)

13. (C) Juan Uribe Vegalara, Director of &El Nuevo Siglo,⁸ a prominent political paper, said the problem was not Penalosa and Mockus' popularity, but rather that their Senate and House lists were filled with unknown candidates. The March 12 elections are shaping up as solely a popularity contest, he said, with little to do with issues (Ref B). The majority

of political parties opted for the preferential voting system, whereby a voter can vote for their preferred candidate. Mockus and Penalosa instead chose closed lists, whereby the voter merely selects the particular party (see Ref A for a detailed explanation of new Congressional electoral rules and dynamics). David Luna, Penalosa's star candidate for the House (the other is Simon Gaviria Munoz, son of former President Cesar Gaviria, now Liberal Party Chief), told Poloff on March 6 that Penalosa filled his list with young candidates over recognized names. Marta Nieto, Director of Publicity for Mockus' campaign said March 8 that Mockus purposely selected candidates based on their integrity, without considering popularity, a decision she admitted was risky. She added that Mockus "would never fill his list with former beauty queens and television personalities."

Penalosa: Blowing in the Wind

¶4. (C) Penalosa has been criticized for floating from one political party to another when it suits him. He began his career as a Liberal, became an independent, and then became an Uribista. Although Penalosa supports Uribe on most issues, he recently created his own party (Sonamos differs in that it supports same-sex unions and a pro-choice platform). Additionally, many claimed his reputation had suffered since he would not provide a straight answer when asked if he planned to resign 3 months after being elected to the Senate to run for mayor of Bogota in 2007. Many believed he would run for mayor again to better position himself for the presidency in 2010. At one time, he was considered a serious candidate for the presidency based on his excellent reputation as mayor of Bogota from 1998 until 2001. Politicians from various parties argue that his four years away from politics, coupled with his choice not to commit to one party, has damaged his credibility and could lead to a poor showing on Sunday.

Mockus: Off the Radar and Still Quirky

¶5. (C) Many political experts have criticized Mockus for running a poor campaign. His attempts to gain attention for his party are viewed by some as too eccentric, particularly by those outside of Bogota. He was renowned for unusual stunts during his two terms as mayor of Bogota, such as dressing in spandex and a cape and walking the streets as "Supercitizen," or holding a ceremony in a public fountain to ask forgiveness for leaving the mayor's office in an unsuccessful bid for the presidency. His penchant for attention-gaining tactics appears to have failed in this campaign. Many question why he is appearing at events wearing a large, triangular, bright orange, styrofoam hat, what his campaign directors describe as the visionary symbol of their party. He is currently polling at 2.8 percent support for president, and few expect him to attain more than 5 percent, a surprisingly low figure for a candidate that many informed opinion makers believed could be a presidential threat a short time ago.

Congressional Prognosis

¶6. (C) Luna said he expects Sonamos to win 3 seats in the Senate and perhaps two in the House, including his. Jorge Eduardo Torres, Director of Mockus' campaign, said on March 9 he foresaw Visionarios obtaining 3 seats in the Senate and one in the House. If this occurs, both parties will reach the necessary level to become official parties and view their results as a success. The new threshold system is a strong incentive for the various fragmented forces in Colombia to combine into larger blocs, but Penalosa and Mockus' unwillingness to do this could mean one or both of the parties dissolve after the election.

Comment

¶7. (C) Although their personal popularity may be enough to see Sonamos and Visionarios secure party recognition, the long-term outlook for these parties is less certain. Penalosa and Mockus, once considered strong contenders for the presidency in 2010, could suffer because of less-than-stellar campaigns, and see their presidential aspirations dampened, at least in the short term.

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